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INTERESTING ... Masing receiving a copy of the book from Poline

Unimas publishes book on Kelabit Highlands

KUCHING: The Dayak Studies Programme at University Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) has published its fourth book entitled 'Changing Borders and Identities in the Kelabit Highlands'.

The book is also the first in the university's 'Dayak Contemporary Society Series'.

Unimas Vice Chancellor Professor Yusuf Hadi said the book is also the second of 12 books targeted to be published by Unimas Publications this year.

The book written by Poline Bala, a lecturer in Unimas, is a manifestation of a masters degree thesis produced by the author herself.

Speaking at the launching of the book by Social Development and Urbanisation Minister Dato Sri Dr James Jemut Masing here yesterday, Yusuf said the book revolved around an international border in the Kelabit Highlands, how it came into existence, and how its presence changed the lives of a community whose home area once spread across the border.

"Playing upon the multiple meanings inherent in the notion of boundaries and the role of boundaries and borders in creating and mediating identities, Poline relates her account of the international border to her own personal journey, from a Highland childhood to becoming an anthropologist and a university lecturer," said Yusuf.

Throughout the book Poline weaved into a story, a series of Kelabit songs or 'laku', he added.

"What makes the book so enjoyable to read is that she uses its central theme to tell a very personal story. But at the same time it is also a very serious story," said Yusuf.

Yusuf said the border at Kelabit Highlands had divided the Kelabit and now they were citizens of two separate nations, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Masing, meanwhile, said the change (socio-economic) that affected the Kelabit community had been largely a story of success.

He said many Kelabit villages were uprooted, moved from the

border area, and regrouped in the Bario region and since then the community had changed beyond recognition.

The Kelabit took particularly to education and the community had produced a greater proportion of doctors, lawyers, teachers, and lecturers than any other indigenous group in the State, said Masing.

Touching on the book, he said it related a wonderful personal story based on the author's own experiences and the stories and songs that she recorded from other people.

"What I like especially about Poline's book is that she uses the poetry and songs of the Kelabit to help tell her story," he said.

"The laku are songs sung chiefly by women about the singer's personal feelings and emotional experiences. These feelings are conveyed through poetic imagery, often images of familiar landscapes," Masing explained, saying the laku also mirrored the feelings of the entire community.

Meanwhile Poline, was delighted

over the launching of the book priced at RM25.

She said the book would be on sale at the bookstores next month but the public could also order them through the Institute of East Asian Studies, Unimas.

Poline was born and grew up in the Kelabit Highlands.

In 1981, she was chosen by Unicef UK, for a development education kit.

She later graduated from the University of Malaya in 1994 and continued her studies at Cornell University, where she received a Masters of Arts degree in 1999 in Asian Studies.

She is also currently a lecturer in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Unimas, where she teaches International Studies.

Poline also played a major part in Unimas 'e-Bario Project' that has brought modern technology to her home there.

The project received international recognition that saw Poline receiving an international award in Washington DC, USA on behalf of the project team, earlier this year.